

Communities Act on Global Environment



LA21 planning team in Durban, South Africa, a member of the Model Communities Program. (Photo courtesy of ICLEI)

2003-02-20

Keane J. Shore

In the Canadian city of Hamilton-Wentworth, citizen groups and planners put together an environmental scorecard the city uses to tally whether its sustainability is improving. It's a comprehensive checklist: bike trails, harbour pollution, salt dumped onto roads to melt winter ice for drivers, per capita electricity use, public transit riders, among others. Monitoring is community-driven.

Half a world away, in Jinja, Uganda, the focus was on decentralizing a top-heavy local political system, to make it easier to improve local services, to protect and improve the city's environment and surroundings. A host of ordinary citizens' community knowledge proved to be the key, both to mapping local environmental problems and to suggesting ways to solve them.

Both were pilot projects in the Model Communities Program, started nearly a decade ago by the Toronto-based [International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives \(ICLEI\)](#), and funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). In all, the four-year pilot program supported 14 communities in 12 countries across Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, New Zealand, Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom. These pilots taught ICLEI the lessons it has since passed on to thousands of other municipalities, through its [Local Agenda 21 \(LA21\)](#) initiative.

'Think globally, act locally'

The initiative's message, and ICLEI's, may be summed up by the late-1980s bumper sticker: 'Think globally, act locally.' The actors, though, aren't individuals. They're cities around the world. LA21 calls on local governments everywhere to develop their own sustainable development action plans to target local needs, while keeping an eye on the planet's general health.

Since the United Nations' *World Congress of Local Governments for a Sustainable Future* in 1990 mandated the organization, ICLEI has been quietly persuading municipalities to face their own sustainable development issues with a view to making the world's environment more sustainable. More than 6,400 cities have opted in to different aspects of LA21. ICLEI is the information broker, researcher, trainer, technical consultant, and general custodian that connects them.

A decade ago, about 200 local governments from 43 countries supported ICLEI's creation. Since then, membership has grown to about 425 cities and municipal associations worldwide. In the broader community, some 6,416 local authorities in 113 countries have undertaken an LA21 planning process originally conceived and championed by ICLEI. Although most LA21 activity is currently taking place in Europe, in the past several years, most of the growth in LA21 activity has been in the Asia-Pacific region.

Model Communities Program

IDRC's involvement with ICLEI grew out of the UN's 1992 Conference on Environment and Development, known as the Rio Earth Summit. There, IDRC was named as one of several organizations that could help bring a meeting resolution called Agenda 21 into reality. Agenda 21 is a global plan for sustainable development adopted by world leaders in Rio. It lays out global tactics for cleaning up the environment and fostering environmentally sound development. Using Agenda 21 as groundwork, ICLEI has been responsible for turning a world movement of cities into adherents through LA21.

IDRC offered early on to act as a research partner with ICLEI on its Model Communities Program. It's one of many community environmental thrusts ICLEI has started under LA21.

"The Model Communities Program aimed to assist local governments to develop, test, and assess different approaches to sustainable development planning," says Denise Deby, a senior program officer at IDRC.

Dr Bowdin King, coordinator of ICLEI's water campaign and LA21 campaign, says that information gained from the Model Communities Program greatly influenced ICLEI's "bible", *The Local Agenda 21 Planning Guide*. This is the document from which most subsequent local participatory environmental planning exercises have drawn. *The Local Agenda 21 Planning Guide* was originally published by ICLEI, IDRC, and the United Nations Environment Programme in English and Spanish. It has subsequently been published in numerous languages worldwide. It has

been used in university curricula and by local and national governments to support their LA21 initiatives.

Moving from “agenda to action”

The LA21 process is one in which cities ask citizens for ideas — both on what the issues are, and how to act on them. Nearly two-thirds of the thousands of cities in the program have adopted local action plans, and of those, citizens’ groups have helped draft close to three-quarters.

“There have been good results, although I would tend to talk about the things we haven’t (yet) achieved,” says Konrad Otto-Zimmerman, ICLEI’s secretary-general. “The clear message is that LA21 is a movement that continues to grow... through the pilots we were able to develop a methodology to lay the ground, to create reference cases.”

In the decade since, based on the pilots, cities have been putting together their LA21 action plans. Otto-Zimmerman says it’s now time to urge more of them, in ICLEI’s words, “from agenda to action.”

Focusing on water issues

One of ICLEI’s main international campaigns deals with water issues. King says water has become a priority for municipalities everywhere, whatever their economic status. They may need to use it more efficiently, or to gain access to a better supply, or improve their sanitation measures.

He adds that while many countries have national policies supporting environmental sustainability, local governments have actually made this issue their own and begun acting upon it — often more quickly and effectively than senior governments. Many of these cities say their national governments’ apparent lack of political will and financing create problems. Cities say they could do much more with more support.

While many cities set priorities on water, LA21 covers the spectrum of environmental and sustainable development issues. Also under ICLEI’s aegis is a movement called Cities for Climate Protection. It’s a growing network of local governments acting to reduce their cities’ greenhouse gas emissions, to improve their air and make them more livable and sustainable. So far, some 550

cities have agreed to reduce greenhouse gases, in agreements reminiscent of the one that national governments ratified in Kyoto, Japan.

“I must stop short of calling them ‘mini-Kyotos.’ But the point is that, at the local level, all of them have made emission reduction commitments, and the interesting thing to note there is that they all read the same,” says Robert Kerr, director of ICLEI’s energy services.

Building momentum — and sustainability

During the World Summit on Sustainable Development, the local government community endorsed the next phase of LA21, *Local Action 21*, as a motto and mandate for the coming decade. ICLEI, Kerr says, wants to build on the momentum that Local Action 21 has gained. Also giving the local agenda growing clout is the fact that participating cities form a tremendous purchasing block — giving them the ability to sway suppliers into creating and selling them greener products and services.

Otto-Zimmerman says Local Action 21 encourages cities to become more sustainable, while heeding what he calls “global common goals.”

“What is the local approach?” asks Otto-Zimmerman. “To create, as far as possible, a viable local economy, that helps create jobs, create economic cycles that would help support people much better.”

Local Action 21 is based on the premise that sustainable development is dependent upon viable local economies, just and peaceful communities and resilient and eco-efficient cities that are able to respond to global concerns for climate protection, air and water quality, and protection of soil and biodiversity.

Keane J. Shore is an Ottawa-based freelance writer.